

The lore and lure of the '43 Lincoln pennies

By Roger Boye

This week's column discusses a coin rich in hobby lore, the 1943 Lincoln penny minted in copper.

Q—I have a 1943 cent, but I don't know if it's one of the exceedingly rare specimens. Does a "D" or "S" below the date influence the value? What should I look for to determine if I've hit the jackpot?—H.M., Carol Stream.

A—During 1943, Uncle Sam made more than 1 billion Lincoln cents out of steel plated with zinc five-thousandths of an inch thick. The military needed all available copper that year to produce guns and bullets for World War II.

With such a huge mintage, 1943 "steelies" have only a modest value today on the hobby market. Fine-condition specimens might retail for from 10 cents to 20 cents, with coins bearing a "D" or "S" below the date worth a little more than those without a mint mark.

Steel cents are easy to identify, of course, given their bright "silver appearance." They weigh slightly less than a copper cent, but have the same design as other Lincolns produced before 1959.

In error government workers also issued a handful of 1943 cents out of the traditional metal mixture of copper with tiny amounts of zinc and tin. Those coins might fetch \$20,000 or more because fewer than 25 specimens are known to exist.

The huge prices have prompted forgers to create thousands of fake 1943 cents. Indeed, some experts believe the 1943 copper Lincoln may be the most-often-counterfeited U.S. coin.

Many of the fakes are 1943 steel cents coated with copper. Fortunately, even a novice can detect them easily because coins with a steel core are magnetic.

Still other con artists alter the dates on a 1945 or 1948 copper cent. If you own a 1943 cent that's not magnetic, check the final digit in the date under high magnification. Scratches would be a clear sign of tampering.

Incidentally, in 1944 Uncle Sam made the same error in reverse. As workers resumed production of the "normal" copper cents, they accidentally placed some extra zinc-coated steel "slugs" into a batch of copper "slugs," creating a few exceedingly rare 1944 steel cents. Those wrong-metal coins are worth as much as the genuine 1943 cents, while 1944 copper cents worn from circulation go for 10 cents or less.

Questions about old coins or currency? Send your queries to Roger Boye, Arts & Books, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611. Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you want a personal reply.